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Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (Book Review)

David Brandenberger

University of Richmond, dbranden@richmond.edu

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Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, eds. *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, trans. by Laura E. Wolfson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. c. 515 pp. \$35.

Reviewed by David Brandenberger, University of Richmond

The exigencies of war in the days and weeks following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 forced Soviet ideologists to augment traditional Marxist-Leninist propaganda with more populist rallying calls. Although many of these new appeals were designed to resonate with ordinary Russians' religious and national sentiments, attempts were also made to court public opinion among the non-Russian population. Party organizations in the national republics and autonomous regions were given considerable latitude to make the case for war. At the same time, five anti-fascist committees were set up at the all-union level to mobilize support for the USSR abroad among groups ranging from scientists and women to the international Slavic community as a whole. Best known among these organizations was the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), which not only conducted international fundraising and propaganda work but also served as something of a domestic lobby for Soviet Jews who lacked more formal representation within the Communist establishment.

Many of these party organizations and committees were reined in toward the end of the war after the wane of their mobilizational *raison d'être*. A number were even re-

proached for indulging in “bourgeois nationalism” in a wave of reaction that stretched into the early 1950s. The JAC was the hardest hit when its wartime service was reappraised during the mid-to-late 1940s in the context of growing Cold War tensions and Soviet anti-Semitism. The JAC’s own naïveté may have compounded its problems, whether in regard to its foreign contacts or to its lobbying activities (most notably, its bid in 1944 to transform the Crimea into a Jewish autonomous region). In any case, not only was the JAC disbanded in 1948, but a car accident was staged to eliminate Solomon Mikhoels, its leader, shortly thereafter. From 1949 to 1952, many of the JAC’s remaining members and associates were quietly arrested, tried, and shot.

Joshua Rubenstein correctly views the elimination of the JAC as part of a larger anti-Semitic campaign conducted during the last years of Josif Stalin’s reign. After all, despite the obscurity of the JAC affair, it was clearly linked not only to Mikhoels’s murder, but also to the subsequent “anti-cosmopolitan” campaigns, the 1951 trial of Rudolf Slánský in Czechoslovakia, and the 1953 Doctors’ Plot in the Soviet Union. Rubenstein describes the affair in considerable detail in his introduction to *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, an abbreviated English-language translation of the trial transcript of fifteen JAC associates executed in 1952. Edited with V. P. Naumov as part of Yale University Press’s Annals of Communism series, the volume is derived from Naumov’s longer Russian-language edition, *Nepravednyi sud: Poslednii stalinskii nasstrel* (Moscow: Nauka, 1994).

Stalin’s Secret Pogrom is a fascinating volume that presents many challenges as a historical source. Much of the information about the JAC and its associates contained in the transcript ought to be treated with great caution. Not only were the charges trumped-up, but the defendants were tortured, and their testimony was coerced. Nor should the transcript itself be studied as an orchestrated spectacle of Stalinist propaganda, inasmuch as the trial was held in secret and lacked much of the hyperbole characteristic of the show trials of the 1930s. Instead, the transcript testifies to the bravery of many of the defendants, who sought throughout the trial to retract their confessions, proclaim their innocence, and exonerate themselves. Although Nikolai Bukharin is famous for having attempted to use his 1938 show trial to turn the tables on the prosecutor Andrei Vyshinskii, his rhetorical game of cat-and-mouse pales before the aggressive defense mounted by the JAC defendants. Their testimony ultimately spurred Aleksandr Cheptsov, the presiding judge at the JAC trial, to ask Georgii Malenkov (Stalin’s top aide) whether the proceedings could be suspended to allow for further investigation—a futile request that had no tangible effect on the murderous outcome of the affair.

It may be that *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom* ought to be considered a martyrological document rather than a historical source per se, not only because of the peculiar circumstances under which the trial took place, but also because of the form in which the transcript itself has appeared in print. Although the English text is more than 420 pages long, it represents only a small fraction of the original typescript, which apparently runs eight volumes in length and remains classified to the present day. Unfortunately, both the Russian- and the English-language editions are silent about what was

omitted in order to reduce the original to a manageable size. More worrisome, although the Russian edition includes ellipses to indicate where many of the cuts were made, the English edition does not. The removal of ellipses in the latter edition was perhaps a cosmetic effect intended to improve the book's accessibility, it has the unintended consequence of weaving what is really a collection of trial excerpts into a seamless narrative, endowing the text with an artificial sense of polish, coherency, and eloquence that is not present in the Russian edition.

This would be a minor issue were it not for questions raised by Alexei Kojevnikov in his review of the book—in *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter 2003)—regarding the nature of the cuts themselves. Intrigued by the thoughtfulness of the defendants' testimony, Kojevnikov took a closer look at how these individuals "constructed" their autobiographies. He found that the defendants described themselves as more-or-less conventional Soviet Jewish cultural figures in the English edition, but when he checked this impression in the longer Russian edition he came across a more complicated story. There, the defendants styled themselves not only as Jews, but as loyal Communists and ardent Soviet patriots. According to Kojevnikov, there are stretches of text missing from the English edition that complicate the defendants' sense of Jewish identity by exposing their ambivalence in regard to their religious faith, their preference for Yiddish or Russian over Hebrew, and their skepticism about the Jewish community abroad. Other missing passages portray the defendants as fierce party loyalists who were well-versed in Marxism-Leninism and who were convinced that the Soviet Union was teeming with spies. Most unexpectedly, many of the defendants apparently regarded each other with considerable hostility and suspicion, belying a community that was deeply divided against itself.

In all likelihood, the editors of the English edition excised some of this material in order to make the text more accessible to Western audiences. In particular, they may have been trying to remove what Russians refer to as *shtamp*—the numbing combination of ritualized lip service, cliché, and "officialese" that dominates most official sources. Purists, however, will question what was gained by such editing. After all, Stalin-era trial transcripts are by definition *supposed* to be shrill, inconsistent, and choked with outrageous claims and spasms of supplication. Their victims are *expected* to be wracked by doubt and conflicting loyalties, in this case having struggled for years to develop Soviet Jewish culture as somehow "national in form, socialist in content." Excessive editing thus simplifies and distorts the historical record, highlighting the "Jewishness" of the defendants at the expense of their "Sovietness." Kojevnikov goes so far as to say that by omitting this material in the English text, the editors inadvertently make the charges of nationalism, disloyalty, and Jewish exceptionalism leveled against the JAC defendants seem almost plausible. Readers interested in a full appreciation of the complex, contradictory nature of Jewish identity during these troubled years may find it useful to consult the Russian edition of the trial transcript alongside *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*.

